

NOTES ON THE ORIGIN OF THE MELODY OF THE "ADESTE FIDELES."

WITH the exception of the *Dies Irae* and the *Stabat Mater*, it is doubtful if there is a more popular hymn in our churches than the *Adeste Fideles*. For close on two hundred years this cento—for the entire hymn is hardly ever sung—has been inseparably associated with the Christmas season, and yet both words and music cannot be traced farther back than 1720. It is extraordinary what a romantic halo encircles some of our best known hymns and folk tunes. Frequently on the principle of *omne ignotum pro mirifico*, the most widely differing accounts of many popular sacred melodies are to be met with, and in several cases any attempt to trace either the author or composer has proved elusive.

Until a few years back the more generally received account of the origin of the *Adeste Fideles* was that the music was due to John Reading, organist of Winchester College, about the year 1680. This account was first circulated by Vincent Novello, organist of the Portuguese Chapel, London, from 1797 to 1822, and of the pro-Cathedral, Moorfields, from 1840 to 1843,¹ who printed the melody in his *Home Music* (1843), set to Psalm 106, with the heading: "Air by Reading, 1680." The following is an extract from Novello's note as to the air:

"John Reading was a pupil of Dr. Blow (the master of Purcell) and was first employed at Lincoln Cathedral. He afterwards became organist to St. John's Hackney, and finally of St. Dunstan's in the West and St. Mary's, Woolnoth, London. He published toward the end of the seventeenth century a collection of anthems of his own composition, and his productions are generally esteemed for their tastefully simple melodies and appropriately natural harmonies. This piece obtained its name of 'The Portuguese Hymn' from the accidental circumstance of the Duke of Leeds, who was a director of the Concert of Ancient Music, many years since (about the year 1785), having heard the hymn first performed at the Portuguese Chapel, and who, supposing it to be peculiar to the service in Portugal, introduced the melody at the Ancient Concerts, giving it the title of the 'Portuguese Hymn,' by which appellation this very favorite and

¹ His daughter Clara, Countess of Gigliucci, born in 1818, is still living in Rome. She was the leading English soprano from 1839 till her retirement in 1860.

popular tune has ever since been distinguished ; but it is by no means confined to the choir of the Portuguese Chapel, being the regular Christmas hymn, *Adeste Fideles*, that is sung in every Catholic chapel throughout England."

Let me now briefly examine Novello's historical note. The melody is said to be the composition of John Reading in 1680, a pupil of Dr. Blow, etc. The fact is that this John Reading, whose organ appointments are quoted, was not born till 1677, and consequently was only three years old in 1680, which date is assigned for the publication of a collection of anthems including the *Adeste Fideles*! His birth took place in 1677, and his Book of Anthems was published in 1716. He died in London, on September 25, 1764. Almost needless to add, the *Adeste Fideles* does not appear among the Anthems.

But there were three John Readings. I have disposed of one, leaving the other two to be dealt with. John Reading (No. 2), organist of Winchester Cathedral, is by some accredited as the composer of the Christmas hymn. He was lay vicar of Lincoln Cathedral in 1667, and Master of the Choristers there in 1670. In 1675 he succeeded Randall Jewitt at Winchester, which position he held till 1681, when he was replaced by Daniel Roseingrave.

From 1681 to his death in 1692, he was organist and music master of Winchester College, and is said to have composed the College "Graces" including the celebrated *Dulce domum*, printed in *Harmonia Wykehamica*, in 1808. His claim to the *Adeste Fideles* rests on no evidence, and indeed it is very doubtful if he composed *Dulce domum*, which I may remark smacks strongly of the flavor of "Papa" Haydn.

Just a word as to the claim of John Reading (No. 3). This composer was organist of Chichester Cathedral from 1674 to 1720, and the only evidence yet brought forward in support of his alleged composition of the *Adeste Fideles* is the similarity of name with the other two above mentioned.

Let us now come to the actual manuscripts and printed copies of the hymn from 1745 to 1845, after which latter year the setting as at present used came into general vogue. But first I must dismiss a recent legend to the effect that the air is to be found in a sixteenth century Gradual of the Cistercian Order. I have examined the Cistercian Gradual of various dates within the six-

teenth century, and nothing approaching a modernly constructed tune, such as is the *Adeste Fideles*, is to be found therein. An esteemed member of the Cistercian community at Mount Melleray corroborates this statement, but internal evidence alone would be tolerably conclusive as pointing to the first quarter of the eighteenth century. I may further state that no tune even remotely resembling the Christmas hymn is to be found in the printed composition of John Reading (No. 1), or yet in his ten autograph manuscript volumes at present belonging to Dr. W. H. Cummings, of London.

The oldest existing manuscript of the melody so far discovered is in a volume of Masses and motets formerly belonging to Father Peter Kenny, S.J., the founder of Clongowes Wood College, Co. Kildare (Ireland), containing autograph musical scores of various dates between the years 1740 and 1749. In this volume is an extraordinary musical *tour de force*, namely a 48-part Mass, arranged for twelve choirs of four voices each. I frequently examined this old folio during the years that I was master at Clongowes Wood College, some twenty years ago.

Of somewhat later date is another precious musical manuscript, now belonging to the Jesuit Fathers of the English Province, at Stonyhurst College, near Blackburn, in Lancashire. This manuscript is beautifully penned throughout by Father John Francis Wade, and the date 1751 is clearly given in the book, being written for a certain Nicholas King. The title-page runs as follows: "Cantus diversi pro Dominicis et Festis per annum: Gloria Patri, post Introitum, Kyrie, Gloria in excelsis, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. Cum Hymnis et Antiphonis ad Elevationem et Benedictionem. Et ex prae cordiis sonent praeconia. Nicolaus King, ejus Cantus. Joannes Franciscus Wade, scriptor. Anno Domini MDCCLI."

Whilst the Clongowes manuscript has merely the tune, the Stonyhurst volume has words and music.² In the latter manuscript there are only four verses,—the first, second, seventh, and eighth of the full text; and the music is given for each stanza, the hymn being headed "In Nativitate Domini Hymnus," or, as it was more generally termed, "Christmas Hymn." Thus in

² A third MS. containing the words and music of the *Adeste Fideles* is now in St. Edmund's College, Ware (England). It is dated 1760, and does not materially differ from the Stonyhurst MS.

1750 the original eight verses had been reduced to the present cento, but it is of interest to state that the Latin verses generally sung at the same period in France were the first, third, fifth, and sixth.³

The first printed version of the tune is in an extremely rare volume of *Hymns for Catholic Service*, published in 1766 by Charles Barbandt, organist of the Bavarian Chapel in London. Sixteen years later, in 1782, the hymn-tune appeared in a little book entitled *An Essay on the Church Plain Chant*, published by an *Irish Catholic* in London. This small volume, also very rare, is in three parts, and the *Adeste Fideles* was printed in Part II, which is described as "containing several Anthems, Litanies, Proses, and Hymns, as they are sung in the Public Chapels at London."

It has been suggested that Samuel Webbe, senior, arranged the music for Coghlan's volume, and he certainly composed many of the pieces contained in the second part; but his claim as composer of the *Adeste Fideles* cannot at all be entertained inasmuch as the air is to be met with in 1745, when Webbe was but five years of age. Moreover the tune was simply taken from Barbandt's volume, printed in 1766, doubtless with the permission of Barbandt, who was Webbe's teacher, and we have no evidence that Webbe composed anything prior to the year 1761, when he became Barbandt's deputy at the chapel of the Bavarian embassy.

We next find the air included in Webbe's *Collection of Motets or Antiphons* published in London in 1792, and thenceforward it was included in almost every collection of sacred music. The first copy I have met with as printed in Ireland is in a small collection issued by P. Wogan of Dublin in 1805, just a hundred years ago. I give this setting on the opposite page.

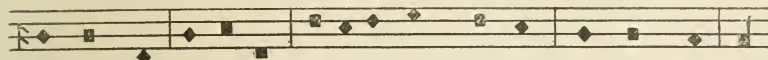
The earliest known copy of the Latin words of the hymn is in Father Wade's manuscript (1751), but their first appearance in print cannot be traced farther back than the year 1760 when the Christmas Hymn was included in "the evening office of the Church." In this work, of which three previous editions—none of which contained the hymn—had appeared respectively in 1710,

³ In December, 1901, an interesting setting of the *Adeste Fideles* with the full text of eight verses was published by Dom Samuel Gregory Ould, O.S.B. Each of the eight verses had an accompaniment by eight modern composers, including Sir Walter Parrott and Sir Hubert Parry.

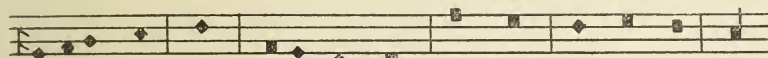
1725, and 1748, the *Adeste Fideles* is prefaced as follows: "From the Nativity of our Lord to the Purification exclusively; whilst the Benediction is giving is sung *Adeste Fideles*."

ADESTE FIDELES.

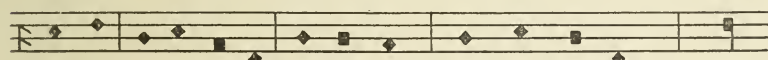
FROM CHRISTMAS TO THE OCTAVE OF EPIPHANY. [1805]



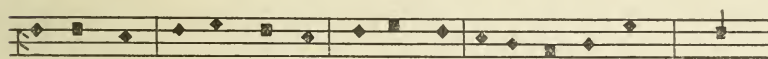
Ades - te fideles laeti triumphantes, Ve - ni - te



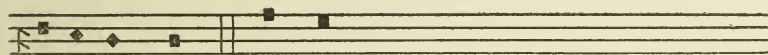
ve - ni - te in Beth-le-hem. Natum vi - de - te



Regem angelorum; venite adoremus,



venite adoremus, venite adore - mus

Do-mi-num. Natum videte, etc.
videte, etc.

English words were adapted to the hymn about the year 1825, and another version was given by Father William Young, of Dublin in 1840, printed with the music in the *Catholic Choralist* (Dublin), in 1842. As Father Young was regarded as a saint equally with his brother, Father Charles Young (whose life has been charmingly written by Lady Georgiana Fullerton), many readers may be glad to see this specimen by his translation, given with the music on page 712.

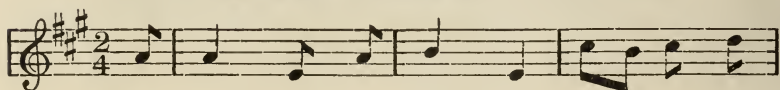
At length in 1841, Canon Oakley, then Rector of St. Margaret's, London, wrote a new translation of the hymn, which was published in 1844. The year following, he became a convert. It is this translation which has ever since been sung in Anglican churches, commencing: "O come all ye faithful." It was included in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. The English words, however, do not go so smoothly with the music as the original Latin. It

is almost unnecessary to add that the Latin words are universally sung in our Catholic churches, and the tune is generally played as a prelude and postlude on Christmas morning.

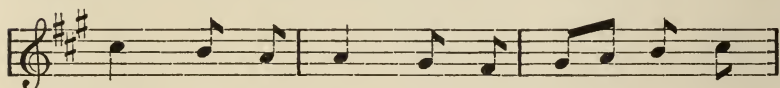
ADESTE FIDELES.

[1842]

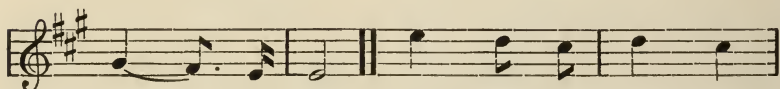
SUNG EACH DAY FROM CHRISTMAS TILL THE OCTAVE OF THE
EPIPHANY AT MASS, VESPERS, AND BENEDICTION.



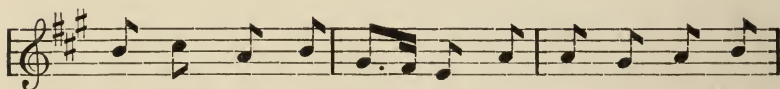
With hearts tru - ly grate - ful, come, all ye



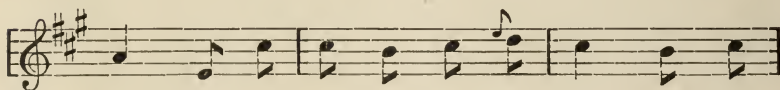
faith - ful, To Je - sus, to Je - sus in



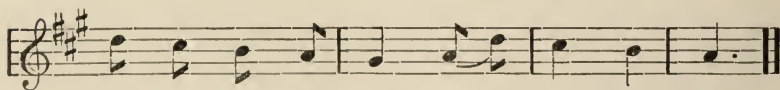
Beth - le - hem. See Christ, your Sav - iour,



heav - 'n's great - est fa - vor, Let's hast - en to a -



dore Him, Let's hast - en to a - dore Him, Let's



hast - en to a - dore Him, our great Lord.

To sum up. It may be taken as tolerably certain that the words and music of this tuneful Christmas hymn go back to the first quarter of the eighteenth century, and are to be attributed to a Catholic source and for Catholic worship.

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